

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WALL STREET JOURNAL
22 May 1986

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Traitors and Journalists

A In recent weeks, William Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has threatened to prosecute two major news organizations for violating a law forbidding the unauthorized disclosure of communications intelligence affecting national security. The controversy has arisen in connection with the espionage trial of Ronald Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency, who is charged with selling the Soviet Union extremely sensitive information.

The two news organizations that have come under pressure from Director Casey are NBC News and the Washington Post. On Monday, NBC's James Polk reported on the "Today" program that Mr. Pelton had compromised an intelligence operation called Ivy Bells, which he said concerned eavesdropping by U.S. submarines in Soviet harbors. Mr. Casey says he has asked the Justice Department to consider prosecution of NBC.

The Post had been involved in extended discussions with Mr. Casey, and on May 10, President Reagan phoned the chairman of the Washington Post Co., Katherine Graham, and asked her not to publish. Yesterday the Post published its Pelton story, but only after deleting descriptive details of the technology that Mr. Pelton allegedly revealed to the Soviets.

Complaints about leaks and press disclosure of classified information have run the five-year length of the Reagan administration. The administration and many of its outside supporters make it fairly clear that they think reporters and their editors are primarily to blame. We don't believe the matter is so cut and dried.

The administration is actually concerned about two classes of leaks; one involves national security, the other has to do with policy battles inside the bureaucracy.

Leaks over policy disputes are more frequent. Nearly all of the high-powered people who become appointed officials believe that their every act is for the public good. These same high-powered people also tend

to have competing opinions of what constitutes the public good and how to achieve it. Wednesday's papers carried not only stories of Mr. Casey's threats to prosecute the press but also of the State Department denouncing the Defense Department for its attitude toward the Contadora negotiations. As the stakes in the bureaucratic wars rise, so often does the sensitivity of the leaks.

It isn't the press's job to referee battles for an administration that can't resolve its attitude on issues such as whether to oppose or tolerate Nicaragua's Sandinista government or to comply with the unratified SALT II treaty. Nor, we think, is the public poorly served in the long run if it gains a measure of access to these internal debates, rather than being shut out of them.

The more serious charge involves assertions that certain stories will, if published, endanger national security. Many of us in this business have been told such things by government officials that we understood were not intended for the next morning's paper. Holding that information in confidence isn't some grandiose act of loyalty; it's an editorial judgment. Reporters accept this information to be able to understand and explain issues to their readers. At the same time, we must say that in recent years some leaked "revelations" on front pages or the evening news seemed to lack serious editorial judgment, providing not much more than political titillation or a showcase for the organization's reporting skills.

We think the problem goes deeper than this, however. We are losing a common understanding of "national security." Its meaning was clear in World War II, when no one doubted that compromising information to an adversary also compromised the nation's survival. But such a shared understanding may be less clear in peacetime or during a Cold War. That brings us to the Pelton affair.

The Washington Post argues logically that if the Soviet Union was told

of this technology by Mr. Pelton, no compelling reason exists to not now publish those details. But the story they published yesterday does little more than list the chronology of Mr. Pelton's contacts with various Soviet agents and diplomats. The average person reading this latest story of an American spying for the Russians might reasonably conclude, So what?

There comes a point in peacetime when a government has to give its people some concrete evidence that its national-security effort is for some real purpose. Why not take this opportunity to reveal the full, awful details and consequences of betraying the U.S. to the Soviet Union?

Last month, the administration's decision to go public with communications intercepted between the Libyan Embassy in East Germany and Tripoli was probably the key factor in building support for the Libyan raid. It was the sort of solid information that shows the game is worth the candle.

Bill Casey and Ronald Reagan may appreciate the nature of the Soviet threat, but they or their successors should not take it for granted that an increasingly young population, some of them reporters and editors, will indefinitely sustain the same level of concern. Or that it will support silence and secrecy justified with little more than the phrase, "endangering national security."

The Soviet Union is a significant threat, which has been shown willing to corrupt Americans into selling out their neighbors. This is not a game. It's a serious, full-time enterprise that deserves to be described in detail, in the press.